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BULGARIAN SCOFFS AT TIMES ARTICLE

Spokesman Doubts Existence of an Agent Quoted on Plot in 1981 Against Pope

A Bulgarian spokesman, responding to an article published in The New York Times on March 23, has questioned whether a Bulgarian intelligence official mentioned in the report actually exists. The official was reported to have said that the Soviet secret police wanted Pope John Paul II killed to prevent Western subversion of Poland.

The Times article said a Bulgarian intelligence official named Dimitar Savov had told Jordan Mantarov, a Bulgarian who later defected in France, that the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence and internal security agency, saw the election of the Polish Pope in 1979 as a threat to Soviet control over Poland.

Mr. Mantarov, identified in the article as a deputy commercial attaché with the Bulgarian Embassy in Paris, has been in French custody since his defection in 1981.

The Bulgarian spokesman, Boyan Traikov, who heads the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, the Government's press service, said in a cablegram sent March 31 that Mr. Mantarov had been an employee of a Government company, Agromachinainpeks, which exports farm equipment, and had worked in Paris as "a maintenance mechanic." This was a reiteration of a statement made last month by the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome.

As to the official named Dimitar Savov, the cablegram said:

"Whether such a person existed or not makes no substantial difference, but nevertheless a checkup was made.

According to the computer of the Ministry of the Interior, nobody of that name works for the Bulgarian State Security Agency, though no less than seven people of that name were found to be working in the militia, as factory guards, traffic controllers, etc."

Savov is a common Bulgarian surname.

Mr. Traikov's cablegram said:

"Do you think it is at all likely that a high-ranking official of an intelligence service that had undertaken such an intricate, top-secret operation as an attempt on the life of the Pope would be so indiscreet as to disclose the plot to such a motley collection of people including counterintelligence agents and even a maintenance mechanic?"

The Times article reported that Mr. Mantarov had told the French authorities about his knowledge of the plot; it also reported the results of a two-month investigation by Nicholas Gage in seven countries in Western Europe on what was known about the Italian investigation into purported Bulgarian involvement in the attempted assassination of the Pope by a Turkish terrorist, Mehmet Ali Agca, on May 13, 1981.

Since his conviction, Mr. Agca has implicated a Bulgarian state airline official in Rome, Sergei I. Antonov, in the plot and the Italians have had the Bulgarian under arrest and investigation.

The information in Mr. Gage's article was checked with independent sources in the United States and in Europe who said they believed Mr. Mantarov was a Bulgarian agent, even though he was not listed as an embassy attaché in France, according to Craig R. Whitney, foreign editor of The Times.

With regard to the assumption that the Soviet Union and Bulgaria wanted the Pope killed to prevent the subversion of Poland, the cablegram said:

"It is well known that the assassination of this Polish Pope, far from reducing tension in Poland, would to the contrary have had a highly destabilizing effect on the situation in that country. If anybody was going to profit from the assassination of the Pope, it was not the socialist countries."